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Trackers Spot Mystery Object Orbiting Earth

By RICHARD FRYKLUND
Star Staff Writer

An unidentified "dark satellite" which could be an unreported Soviet space project is tumbling around the earth.

Exactly what it is, Navy satellite trackers do not know. But they have virtually ruled out the possibility it could be a meteorite and they are sure it is not an American satellite or any the Russians have admitted sending up.

The Pentagon officially would only say that there is an unknown satellite "which we have been watching for some time which may be of Soviet origin."

There is a chance it could be a forgotten stage of some old satellite rocket.

Part of Failure?

Or, it is speculated in the Pentagon, it could be the remains of a Soviet satellite failure—a failure the Kremlin is not willing to admit exists.

One theory advanced in military circles is that the dark satellite could be a secret Soviet surveillance platform keeping watch over American military installations. This country is developing just such a satellite, but it will not be ready for use for several years.

The dark satellite is in a polar orbit. No known Soviet satellite shot has ever used a polar orbit, and American satellite experts say it is unlikely that a Soviet satellite could be steered from another orbit into a north-south circuit. But they say also that this country would not necessarily be able to detect the takeoff of a polar-orbiting satellite.

The satellite is tumbling slowly end over end. It is silent. No radio signals are heard as it passes overhead, and military sources doubt that it could be broadcasting information over the Soviet Union without American radio stations overhearing.

"This object," the Pentagon announcement said late yesterday, "is slightly smaller than the United States Discoverer carrier rocket of which six are now in orbit in a somewhat similar path."

Less Than 20 Feet

This means the dark satellite is something less than 20 feet long and 5 feet in diameter. The Discoverer stages still in orbit are empty shells which once contained fuel. Now they weigh about 1,700 pounds.

If the dark satellite is full of instruments — and no one knows it is — it could weigh 15 or 20 tons.

The possibility that it could be a lost Discoverer second stage has almost been ruled out. Its orbit does not square with the orbits of any of the "space garbage" left behind by American shots—or known Soviet shots.

There are 11 man-made objects still in orbit around the earth, in addition to the dark satellite.

Navy trackers keep tabs on two Vanguards, two Explorers, Russia's Lunik III, and Sputnik III and six Discoverer second stages.

The dark satellite was found by the Navy space surveillance system about two weeks ago, informed sources say. The tracking radar network, centered in Fort Stewart, Ga., and Brown Field, near San Diego, has been following the unknown object and trying to calculate from its orbit whether it is one of ours or one of theirs.

A check of known orbits showed it probably was something new. Pentagon information officials wanted to make the discovery public promptly, but scientists and intelligence officers preferred to wait until the nature of the dark satellite was determined.